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Abstract

This paper seeks to critique the ways in which post-colonial theory, especially as it is produced, consumed and valorized by Western academia, informs and inscribes critical reception and canonization of literary productions from ex-colonized societies. Despite the fact that post-colonial theory is a revisionary project that aims to foreground and recuperate repressed, excommunicated, marginalized and othered epistemes, it does not, and perhaps cannot, mobilize its formations in a completely nonhegemonic mode and, thus, creates its own marginalia. With this statement, I may be running the risk of having an essentialist view about post-colonial theory but I am aware that even anti-essentialism cannot but produce its own essence. Post-colonial theory, as a discursive formation, inevitably hierarchizes some subject positions into 'ideal' post-colonial positions - turning them into the same despotic icons that it seeks to dismantle.

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Decolonizing Post-colonial Theory

This paper seeks to critique the ways in which post-colonial theory, especially as it is produced, consumed and valorized by Western academia, informs and inscribes critical reception and canonization of literary productions from ex-colonized societies. Despite the fact that post-colonial theory is a revisionary project that aims to foreground and recuperate repressed, excommunicated, marginalized and othered epistemes, it does not, and perhaps cannot, mobilize its formations in a completely non-hegemonic mode and, thus, creates its own marginalia. With this statement, I may be running the risk of having an essentialist view about post-colonial theory but I am aware that even anti-essentialism cannot but produce its own essence. Post-colonial theory, as a discursive formation, inevitably hierarchizes some subject positions into 'ideal' post-colonial positions – turning them into the same despotic icons that it seeks to dismantle.

One may argue that post-colonial theory re-appropriates the theoretical terminology of the West but, still, it is impossible to deny that it also constructs a prescriptive model for post-colonial literary and cultural productions as well as for their exegesis. The choice of themes, material and language for post-colonial writers is determined by the discursive formations of post-colonial theory. These discursive formations of post-colonial theory can deny opportunities to writers and artists, from ex-colonized societies, to explore the themes that are not valorized and consumed by the post-colonial theorist. In this way, post-colonial theory creates its own exclusions that exist in ex-colonized societies. Though post-colonial theory may create some opportunities for circulation and consumption of cultural productions from ex-colonized societies, in its very formations one can hear the lamentations of the excluded.

Post-colonial theory, as a field of study in Western academia, has all the characteristics of a hegemonic discourse. The institutionalized and academic patronage of post-coloniality operates as an insidious technology of appropriation because of the material and cultural dominance of the West and post-colonial conditions are homologized in the same way as indigenous peoples were homologized into 'savages' and 'pagans' during the colonial period. Though these homologizations may facilitate theoretical discourses of/about post-coloniality, they also produce an oppressive and prescriptive closure for the cultural productions from post-colonial societies. Post-colonial theory, like other fields of knowledge, operates on some inevitable

exclusions that it cannot enclose. These exclusions do not exist outside post-colonial theoretical discourses but are constructed simultaneously with every enunciation regarding the conditions of ex-colonized societies. For example, the constructed assumption that the major concern of the literatures from erstwhile colonized societies is the resistance to the absent colonizer¹ also produces its own others. Ashis Nandy's remark that 'India is not non-West because non-West is a Western construct' can illustrate the arguments given above.²

The shift from 'Commonwealth Literature' to 'post-colonial literatures' has also failed to remove all the inherent contradictions of the earlier label, because so far the dominant post-colonial texts and their critiques are in the languages of the First World readers and it seems that post-coloniality is best, if not always, expressed in languages that Western theorists can understand. To undermine this cultural hegemony, Ngugi wa Thiong'o decided to give up writing in English altogether³ but even he has to translate himself into English because no First World theorist can be bothered to learn Gikuyu. Ngugi is important to the First World academia as long as he speaks or writes in English, whether original or translated. Moreover, post-colonial theory, while dealing with the colonial and the post-colonial issues also constructs an illusion that colonized societies suffered only when the colonizers were there and, after the departure of the colonizers, their only concern is to write back to the colonial centre. With this constructed preoccupation of ex-colonized societies with the colonial centre, post-colonial theory precludes any amnesiac celebration of the present. As a result post-colonial theory turns the end of territorial colonialism into a source of perpetuation of cultural, academic, theoretical and philosophical colonialism. Therefore, post-colonial theory prescribes and theorizes only that limited/thwarted subversion that it can contain.

For the mobilization of an effective post-colonial emancipatory project, it is important that theoretical discussions of the cultural interactions between the colonizing and the colonized peoples not construct homogenized versions of the West as always oppressing and the East as always oppressed by the West, always struggling against the hegemony of the West and free from indigenous oppressive technologies. In the interaction among different races and cultures, the West is not the only source of repression and there are other pre-colonial and post-colonial social realities that may have nothing to do with Western hegemony. What post-colonial theory does not foreground is the fact that oppression does not begin and end with the arrival and departure of colonizers and that caste system, religious and bureaucratic authorities and economic exploitation of the native by the native can be more vicious than colonialism. It is possible to struggle against the colonizers and make them leave the country (as happened in India) but it is more difficult to fight against the native forms of oppression and it is more painful to be marginalized by one's own fellow beings.

The Eurocentric discussions of syncreticity, hybridity and the arrival of

other cultures into the First World classroom acquires an obscene (post) capitalistic form of consumption of the exotic. The indigenous realities, knowledges and cultures remain marginalized when Western episteme is considered competent enough to deal with all the issues of other cultures. For Western academia, post-colonial theory makes the cultural productions of other cultures more and more docile and 'theorizable'. Through its patronage of other cultures with post-colonial theory, the Western academy not only maintains and perpetuates a Eurocentric world-view but also 'Europomorphizes' other cultures by assigning them familiar philosophical labels and terms. The exotic other that once invited territorial/physical exploration now invites as well as justifies theoretical exploration. With post-colonial theory, Western academia turns the past territorial exploitation of the corpus of the other into a continuing theoretical exploitation. It seems as if colonial history is repeating itself but now with the prefix 'post' to penetrate another realm – the most abstract immaterial recesses of the other.

Western discursive representations of post-colonial literatures tend to operate without considering the stark economic and social realities and, in this way, this celebration of a radical alterity continues the hegemony of Western culture. Because Western theories such as post-structuralism and post-modernism inform the enunciations of post-colonial theory, the dominant culture remains the discoverer of the greatness of its others. The fact that the presence of colonies was itself a decentralizing force that paved the way for the development of the post-structuralist/post-modernist theories that question the notion of a fixed cultural centre remains repressed. The arrival of post-colonial theory as a dominant discourse in Western academia may provide a better market for the cultural productions of the ex-colonial societies but it does not mean that it can generate any symmetrical relations of power between the East and the West. Post-colonial theory does not and cannot promise any extra-discursive space for the Other. This paradox of post-coloniality originates from the site where post-colonial theory has gained dominance.

Because post-colonial discourses have their origins in First World academia – as colonial discourses originated in the West – the critical reception of cultural productions from ex-colonized societies remains mediated, authorized, monitored and contained by the West. The reception of the writing from the so-called 'post-colonial' countries depends on the Western models of literary excellence and/or a narcissistic view of radicalism of a work as it relates to (neo)colonialism. Even in this context, radicalism is often measured in terms of an oppositional model of national identity founded in ideas of the nation adopted from Western models. A 'true' post-colonial perspective on literature has not yet been, and may never be, achieved because the Western episteme remains the dominant episteme. In the words of Sri Aurobindo, if Indians had colonized the West, they would have dismissed:

Shakespeare as a drunken barbarian of considerable genius with an epileptic imagination, the whole drama of Greece and Spain and England as a mass of bad ethics and violent horrors ... and French fiction as a tainted and immoral thing.⁴

These lines make it clear how material and cultural dominance can affect the reception of supposedly autotelic or ahistorical cultural productions. If I may usurp the luxury of being an essentialist, Aurobindo hints at the true post-colonial perspective which will never be achieved by the current modes of post-colonial theorization in Western academia with all its vested interests. Because the on-going cultural hegemony of the West is still a social reality in so many post-colonial or ex-colonized societies, to attain a real post-colonial cultural condition, all of the ex-colonized countries should colonize their respective colonial centres and then produce theoretical treatises about the colonized. With the present modes of circulation of post-colonial theory, the historical traces of the cultural and material hegemony of the West do not disappear completely and keep playing a very important role in the production and reception of cultural and literary texts.

The theories of the ambivalence of colonial discourse only show that the oppressive beginning of the colonial discourse produces its own slippage and deferral through the production of a figure of mimicry in the introduction of English education: 'The *menace* of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority.'⁵ What about the slippage, deferral and ambivalences of post-colonial discourse? Once mobilized, post-colonial discourse, like colonial discourse, cannot contain its slippage that is inherent in its origins in Western academia, though often repressed and excluded under the guise of a monolithic narrative of grand unfolding of ex-colonized civilizations.

In India, for example, the novels of Fielding, Brontë and Jane Austen provided the indigenous writers with the idea of the love match that led to the novels dealing with the themes of love and thus constructed an alternative emotional and societal ethos in contrast to the dominant practice of arranged marriages. The first novel of Chandra Chatterji, *Rajmohan's Wife*, tells the story of a woman who falls in love with the brother of her husband and that love wins after many upheavals. Rabindranath Tagore also provided a comparison/contrast between love and arranged marriage in his novel *The Wreck*.⁶ These narratives mark the beginning of a change in the themes of regional literatures and the dominant Brahminic ideals that faced the challenges of Western bourgeois ideals of liberty and individual freedom and progress.

Moreover, despite the celebratory attitude of Western academia towards cultural productions of ex-colonized countries, criticism of Indian English literature within India is still dealing with the problem of the 'Indianness' of Indian English literature and what this Indianness stands for. Oliver Perry in his book *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism* quotes some sentences from a personal letter that C. D. Narasimhaiah, one

of the most towering figures in Indian English criticism, wrote to him: 'I have some strong prejudices against Indian English poetry which ... is largely metropolitan in its content and expression' and the poets are not 'grounded in their native culture' or 'nourished by it'.⁷ Such a statement from Narasimhaiah who is one of the most prominent critics of Indian English literature and the editor of a very reputable journal called *The Literary Criterion* betrays how the concept of 'Indianness' can exclude the writings that describe contemporary and urban experiences of Indian society. Though revivification of pre-colonial national and indigenous reality was an important step by the pioneers of Indian English literature, the continuous rejection of metropolitan and urban Indian reality by many Indian critics has hampered the discussion of contemporary theoretical problems in Indian English criticism and 'criticism by Indians and others has dealt repeatedly with the three major English novelists – R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Raja Rao – whose work spans decades before and after independence'.⁸

This process of canonization that operates on the basis of an essentialist idea of 'Indianness' still reflects how deeply the British education system has affected the process of cultural productions. Though the curriculum of English literary study during the colonial period was not based on any concept of 'Englishness' as such but spoke of civilization, tradition and a 'high' culture with texts of Shakespeare, Milton and Wordsworth and later the productions of national and nationalist literatures both attempted to emulate and surpass the standards of Western literature. This strategy was effective as far as creation of a counter-discourse was concerned but after the independence of India, turned into a domination of elitist aesthetics that were coterminous with the concept of 'Indianness.'

The original negation of urban experiences, because the city was considered a Westernized space, has proved to be the rut in which indigenous criticism of Indian Writing in English seems to have been caught. The theoretical position that provided the space to launch a counter-discourse has become the site of a nostalgia that rejects contemporary forms of expression as essentially non-Indian. This state of indigenous criticism is not different from imperial criticism of Indian English Literature in its attitude towards Indian English literature.

In India, the writers who choose to write in English are considered to be elitists/outsideers by the critics who employ regional languages of India because of Indian English's 'historical origins in pre-Independence British English and multiple and divisive forms and functions at that time'.⁹ Moreover, many critics still employ the traditional British models of criticism and look for some 'universal' values in Indian English literature. And if traditional British values and standards of judging literature remind them of the colonial history of India, the critics employ the ancient Sanskrit *rasa-dhavan*i principles of judging a work of art.

Ashcroft et al. suggest that this conflict between indigenous and foreign

theories of criticism is basically a problem related to the project of decolonization.¹⁰ Privileging some indigenous critical theory is an important strategy for asserting the specificity of a cultural tradition and preventing it from being incorporated into a neo-colonialist Western aesthetic, but it can also function as a limiting strategy when it fails to include Indian urban or metropolitan experiences in an aesthetic framework. Whereas the traditional indigenous literary criticism of India has also proved resilient against the neo-universalism of post-modernism which foregrounds the play of endless deferral and attempts to pre-empt indigeneity as an apolitical and non-radical form of identity, the same traditional aesthetic has often abrogated the hegemony of Western modernity. Paranjape, an Indian critic, rejects Homi Bhabha and Spivak because:

Their stake in India and the health of our academic culture ... is minimal. They speak to the West, seek to modify Western modes of thinking and writing. If they had a real stake in India, they would publish in India, ensure that their work is readily available here. But I am yet to find a single essay by either of them in an Indian periodical.¹¹

These objections against Bhabha and Spivak effectively hint at the immanent politics of publishing, marketing, circulation and consumption of critical texts within Western academia.

On the other hand, if essentialist and nativist theories are not employed, then a lack of understanding of the historical and cultural contexts of alterity appears and the critics start applying Western critical theories without caring for the cultural relevance of these theories. At a 'global' level or in First World academia, where post-colonial theory and literatures are the latest buzz-words in the fields of literature and cultural studies, there are different models and circuits of interpretations and reception of a so-called 'Third World' text. Fredric Jameson in his article 'Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism' has asked for a different approach to Third World texts because these texts are basically allegories of the nation.¹² Jameson's prescriptive strategies are based on a Eurocentric model of cultural productions and the Western history operates as a self-justified 'given' behind this recommendation and 'his conceptualisation of the Third World nation's identity is shaped by economic and cultural models that are western'.¹³

In JanMohamed and Parry's model of post-colonial reality, the world remains a bifurcated and polarized reality with its manichean dichotomies between black and white, the colonized and the colonizer, exploiter and exploited, oppressor and oppressed. For them, there are no in-between spaces, no thirdnesses and no hybridity other than impurity and critical *naïveté*. For Homi Bhabha, assertions of ethnicity and cultural identity betray a lack of contingency and ignorance of ruptures, and universally shifting subject positions have become the privileged way to reach a cultural and ethnic utopia. Ania Loomba has pointed out the problems with

Bhabha's theory of hybridity and how this hybridity is enunciated in his writings. One of the problems that Loomba has discussed is that Bhabha tries to jump from 'a particular act of enunciation to a theory of all utterance'¹⁴ by taking one example and making it account for the whole colonial encounter.

Similarly Loomba has pointed out how Spivak's theory of a silent subaltern subject suggests an impossibility of subaltern agency. Though Spivak is more aware of her position as a post-colonial critic and theorist than Bhabha, both of them have not produced theories that can take into account ways of recovering, negotiating and enunciating one's identity and agency. Spivak's work has resulted in an assertion of theoretical impossibility of subalterns' voice and denial of a 'nostalgic, revisionist recovery' of subjectivity.¹⁵ Loomba has pointed out in her article that some 'alternative ways of being and seeing' must be recognized and welcomed if we have to preventing the subaltern from being 'theorized into silence':

The choice between stark oppositions of coloniser and colonised societies, on the one hand, and notions of hybridity that leave little room for resistance outside that allowed by the colonising power on the other, between romanticising subaltern resistance or effacing it, is not particularly fertile.¹⁶

Another model of post-colonial literatures which is not an original contribution to the field but rather operates on an eclectic combination of different theories and now has acquired almost a neo-colonial canonical importance is given by Ashcroft et al. in *The Empire Writes Back*. It not only speaks on behalf of all the post-colonial subjects but also celebrates their arrival in the global academic and critical discourses. What was once a colonial centre now becomes a post-colonial centre when all the nations, which were once part of the Empire, are now writing back to the centre. The cultural hegemony of the centre is taken for granted because 'the nexus of power involving literature, language, and a dominant British culture has strongly resisted attempts to dismantle it'.¹⁷ This homogenization of all post-colonial literatures constructs a necessity in order to facilitate post-colonial theorization that operates on the binarism of centre and periphery. In this manner, all the post-colonial nations and cultures are homogenized and the presence of neo-colonial hegemony, multinational capital enterprises, mass media are seen to be less powerful and influential than the British culture. The cultural productions that do not fit the criteria of the First World post-colonial theorist because they move away from all centres instead of writing back to the centre, and evince influences other than the colonial legacies of English literary studies or Brahminic aesthetics, are simply ignored.

At the end of the twentieth century, the old colonial centre is not the only source of cultural imperialism and exploitation and the prescriptive nature of post-colonial theory thwarts a complete decolonization. Arun P. Mukherjee has summed up the problems with post-colonial theory:

- (a) The theory claims that the major theme of literatures from postcolonial societies is discursive resistance to the now absent coloniser.
- (b) It unproblematically assumes that the writers who write back to the centre are representing their people of their society authentically.
- (c) The theory downplays the different [*sic* difference] between the settler colonial and those colonised in their home territories, using the term 'colonised' for both of them.¹⁸

Similarly, Harish Trivedi has also given cogently valid arguments about the continuity of the West's hegemony in colonial and post-colonial periods. He argues that post-colonial theory is an attempt to 'whitewash the horrors of colonialism as if they had never been, and a scheme to see the history of a large part of the world as divided into two neat and sanitized compartments, the pre-colonial and the post-colonial'.¹⁹ The major problem with the formation of post-colonial theory is the degree of self-consciousness it attaches to itself, but, like other fields of knowledge, it is not free from its generalizations, homogenizations and celebratory cant. Moreover, as a field of study, post-colonial theory does not operate independently of the economies and institutions that control and regulate fields of knowledge and the vested interests of those who have more power to influence the discursive formations of a field. For example, the patronage that certain writers receive at global level is almost directly proportionate to the size of the publishing house that markets their books and the local and international prizes that these writers receive. Harish Trivedi gives the example of Salman Rushdie who with 'the publication of *Midnight's Children* (or more accurately, with the award to it of the Booker prize) in 1981 ... has remained the foremost, almost emblematic, post-colonial writer'.²⁰

On the other hand, the writers whose books are published by local publishers or local subsidiaries of international publishers have to travel a long trajectory for global recognition, and concomitant Western recognition and canonization. A work that is only available within India because of the vicissitudes of (in)visible gods of consumerism and market-place does not receive that theoretical attention that is available to a metropolitan post-colonial writer. Harish Trivedi has remarked that if asked about three or four works that effectively represent post-coloniality in India, he would name two Hindi novels, *Maila Anchal* (1954) by Phanishwarnath Renu and *Raag Darbari* (1969) by Shrilal Shukla, 'fictional-satirical sketches' by Harishankar Parsai and the six volumes of poetry of Raghuvir Sahay;²¹ but because no First World post-colonial theorist has recognized and/or theorized the post-colonial potential of these works, these works and their creators have not been granted an entry in the dominant post-colonial discourse. Trivedi's statement asks us to re-think the relationship between Indian literature and post-colonial theory.

Discursive formation of a field of study, whether colonial or post-colonial in origin, produces its own exclusions and marginalia. Post-colonial theory,

because of its fixation with the centre and the periphery, does not have the flexibility to speak for all the cultural realities that exist in ex-colonized societies. When post-colonial theory does not always lead to the colonial/post-colonial centre, the post-colonial project will be decolonized.

NOTES

1. Arun P. Mukherjee, 'Postcolonialism: Some Uneasy Conjectures', in *Interrogating Postcolonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, ed. by Harish Trivedi and Meenakshi Mukherjee (Shimla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1996), p. 15. This is a very scathing critique of the discursive formation of post-colonial theory. See my review of this book in *New Literatures Review*, 32 (1997).
2. Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of the Self under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), p. 73.
3. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Currey, 1986). In this book, Ngugi said farewell to creative writing in the English language. Though sometimes accused of essentializing pre-colonial African identity, Ngugi's writing is always an uplifting experience for the ones who want to have an identity in the face of the endless post-modern deferral.
4. Sri Aurobindo, *The Human Cycle* (Ashram: Pondicherry, 1943), p. 83.
5. Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. 88.
6. Mulk Raj Anand, 'The Changeling: Indian English Literature: Its Relevance', *The Literary Half-Yearly*, XXX, One (1989), p. 32.
7. John Oliver Perry, *Absent Authority: Issues in Contemporary Indian English Criticism* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 1992), p. 16.
8. John Oliver Perry, p. 7.
9. John Oliver Perry, p. 56.
10. W.D. Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, eds. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literature* (London: Routledge, 1989), p. 117.
11. Makarand Paranjape, 'Coping with Post-colonialism', in *Interrogating Postcolonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, p. 42.
12. Fredric Jameson, 'Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism', *Social Text*, 15 (1986), p. 69.
13. Rekha Pappu, 'Determining Nations, Literatures and Theory', in *Interrogating Postcolonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, p. 90.
14. Ania Loomba, 'Overworlding the Third World', in *Colonial Discourse and Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman, (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1994), p. 309.
15. Ania Loomba, p. 309.
16. Ania Loomba, p. 308.
17. Ashcroft et al., p.4.
18. Arun P. Mukherjee, p. 15.
19. Harish Trivedi, 'India and Post-colonial Discourse', in *Interrogating Post-colonialism: Theory, Text and Context*, p. 235.
20. Harish Trivedi, p. 232.
21. Harish Trivedi, pp. 239-240.